

Stellar Safety Record Is No Accident for Limo Company

Just as it is in a company's best interest to train employees, it is also beneficial to make sure their independent contractors are well-trained.

Since its inception 2 decades ago, Valera Global (www.valeraglobal.com) has offered a training program to its independent-contractor chauffeurs.

In addition to conducting an intensive prescreening process for prospective chauffeurs, the company requires all new chauffeurs to complete a 12-day training program, which is offered over the course of 2 weeks.

"It's about the most comprehensive in the industry—perhaps in the country," says Tony Notaristefano, training director for Valera Global, which is based in Queens, New York, and has affiliates in London, Paris, and 30 U.S. cities.

Training Combats Turnover

As independent contractors, the chauffeurs pay to take the training, he says. That is unusual for the industry, but he says that the investment gives chauffeurs a vested interest in succeeding.

The first year of driving is the primary focus of the training program. "This industry typically attracts inexperienced people, and the turnover rate is highest ... in the first few months," he explains.

Nine of the 12 days of training include 5 hours of instruction on safety and service issues. Topics include customer service, appropriate work attire, rules in dispatching procedures, geography and map reading, and defensive driving techniques.

The other 3 days are reserved for on-the-job training in which instructors spend 10 to 12 hours per day riding with a new chauffeur and coaching him or her, according to Notaristefano.

Testing, Follow-up Essential

Testing is done daily and at the end of the first and second weeks of training to ensure that chauffeurs have mastered the material. "They are evaluated by at

least five different instructors before they are on the road" driving a client, he says.

Once a week during their first month on the road, chauffeurs meet with Notaristefano or his assistant to review any problems and seek additional input.

In addition, chauffeurs may contact their instructor by telephone with questions. When a chauffeur has remained on the job for 6 months, the trainer receives a bonus for his or her extra efforts.

Thirty days after training has been completed, instructors "road test" chauffeurs again, and a company owner teaches another customer service class, he says.

Both new and experienced chauffeurs receive follow-up training in customer service and safety periodically throughout the year, and the safety message is constantly reinforced. For example, every company memo contains the message "Drive Safely," and dispatchers provide daily safety messages, according to Notaristefano. Those include reminders to drive slowly on the highway and to be wary of weather-related road conditions.

DriveCam Helps Safety

About 4 years ago, the company added a "DriveCam" to each vehicle. A DriveCam is a camera installed on the windshield with continuously running video. Anytime a chauffeur makes a sharp turn, stops abruptly, or hits an object, the DriveCam saves 10 seconds before and after the incident, enabling Valera Global to review what happened and to discuss the incident with the chauffeur. "This has been an incredible tool for us," says Notaristefano.

When the system was first installed, it captured about 10 incidents per week for each of the company's 200 chauffeurs. However, that figure is now only about 2 to 3 per week, he says, and Valera Global has one of the best safety records in the industry.

Who: Valera Global
What: Offers a chauffeur training program. Uses vehicle cameras to evaluate performance and provide feedback.
Results: Lower accident and incident rates. Forty percent drop in liability insurance for chauffeurs.

Coupled with the training program, Notaristefano also credits the system with lowering accident rates, reducing by 40 percent the liability insurance rates paid by the chauffeurs and minimizing turnover. On average, chauffeurs have been with the company for 4 years.

Valera Global reinforces chauffeurs' safety efforts at a companywide awards dinner every January in which a variety of awards are presented. For each year that a chauffeur has been accident free, he or she gets a \$100 bonus. Last year, one chauffeur received \$1,100 for driving accident free for 11 years, Notaristefano says. "It's a huge, huge incentive for them."

Follow the Rules of the Road

Notaristefano offers the following advice:

- **Focus on safety.** Providing mints, water, and newspapers to clients and having a well-mannered, well-dressed chauffeur are all good for business. However, "if you are in a driving/customer service business, safety is absolutely the most important thing you can do," he says.
- **Be consistent.** Set clear expectations about safety and customer service—for both employees and independent contractors.
- **Hold people accountable.** Consider implementing systems, such as DriveCam in the case of a driving business, to help evaluate performance. Review incidents and take steps to avoid similar situations from occurring in the future.